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ACTION

CONFIDENTIAL
(CODEWORD MATERIAL ATTACHED)
[Not located]

April 9, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: Richard L. Snider

SUBJECT: Memo on Laos

**I attach the study on Laos, which you had requested
be refast as a memorandum to the President.**

RE COMMENDATION:

That you sign the attached memo at Tab A.

NSS Review
Completed.

MORI C05139113

Attachment

**cc: Secretariat (2)
WH File (1)**

LGrant (4/9/69)
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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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4/15/67

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: The War in Laos and the Significance of the
Fall of Na Khang

The war in Laos took a serious turn a month ago with the fall of the Na Khang guerrilla base in Northeastern Laos.

I attach a CIA study done at our request which concludes that the loss of Na Khang does not drastically alter the tactical situation, nor necessarily signal an intensification of the Communists' dry-season offensive. The psychological damage to shake Government morale may be the most significant aspect of the event.

The study assumes that the RLG is likely to react to the fall of Na Khang with panicky withdrawals if other Government positions come under attack. In recent weeks, Souvanna Phouma has shown himself very seriously worried, but the Government forces have not panicked. They have made a series of probes to throw the Communists' timetable off. At Souvanna's request we have supplied the Lao troops with 4000 automatic rifles, widened the area of our air strikes and struck at Communist material supplies in the Plain of Jars. These actions have perhaps slowed the enemy, but it is still an open question whether he will have advanced far enough fundamentally to affect the balance of forces in Laos, before the rains come in a few weeks and bring a halt to his advances.

The Two Struggles: There are two levels of conflict in Laos - the more limited conflict between the RLG and the Communists and the larger conflict relating to the Vietnam War. The smaller conflict is being fought in the shadow of the larger. The RLG would collapse without U.S. aid and FEOF. The Pathet Lao is dependent upon North Vietnam, which could take over Laos very quickly if it wished. The shaky equilibrium which has survived

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since 1962 has been at the sufferance of the outside powers, who have chosen to contain the Laos conflict rather than to attempt a fundamental shift in the balance of power within Laos.

The Communist Strategy: North Vietnam has been willing to tolerate the present balance because

-- Its control of the "Ho Chi Minh trail" has not been threatened and it has been able to maintain generally effective control of the hill areas bordering North Vietnam.

-- It has calculated that a move which put Communists in control of the Mekong plain or toppled the RLG would probably remove the restraints upon a more massive U.S. effort to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail.

-- It has probably calculated that, after a Communist victory in South Vietnam, Communist control of Laos could be brought about easily, and primarily through political means.

-- To communize Laos now would lose much third world sympathy for North Vietnam, would unalterably demonstrate that the Communists had chosen to tear up the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962, and might encounter resistance from the USSR, which probably favors the present situation as offering more leverage than it would have with a Communist Government in power.

The North Vietnam calculation may have shifted somewhat in recent months, since the balance of incentives and disincentives has been changed. Since the bombing halt in North Vietnam, the U.S. has spent much more effort on harassing the Ho Chi Minh trail, which may affect the Communist view of the usefulness of the present arrangement. At the same time, the Communists probably believe that the U.S. is less likely to escalate the war by massive intervention against the trail. Finally, North Vietnam may wish to institutionalize some arrangement which would give it continuing access to South Vietnam through Southern Laos in the event of an agreement in Paris.

The Communists, with Soviet help, seem presently to be orchestrating a major effort to restore the balance in their favor by forcing a halt in the U.S. bombing of Laos. Their point of

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pressure will be upon Souvanna Phouma, to whom they presumably have offered or will offer a combination of inducements (Communist participation in a revitalized Government of National Union) and threats (Communist encroachments upon RLG-controlled territory) to persuade him to call for a halt in the bombing.

The Soviet and Chinese interests conflict, as usual. The Soviets probably have more leverage with Souvanna Phouma than they would with a Communist-dominated Government of Laos. The Chinese seek the establishment of a Communist Government responsive to the North Vietnamese and themselves. In this circumstance, we have a certain overlap of interest with the Soviets in maintaining the Souvanna administration.

The U.S. Strategy: We have tolerated the Laos equilibrium for these reasons:

-- Control over the Mekong Valley, with its access to Thailand, has remained in friendly hands.

-- We have been able, with Souvanna Phouma's agreement and support, to monitor movements along the Ho Chi Minh trail and to harass it by air and, to a lesser extent, on the ground.

-- Most important, an effort to tip the Laos balance in our favor would require a major expansion of our war effort.

The "Little War": The internal balance has been remarkably stable since 1962-63 when the RLG effectively absorbed most of the Neutralists, and the Communists absorbed the remainder. We have defused threats from the Right by making clear that our support is for Souvanna Phouma, and he seems to face no immediate challenge for control of the RLG.

The two sides have tended to consolidate and expand their control in their own zones. However, Communist control of the uplands has been resisted by pro-RLG Meo guerrillas, which number some 40,000, which receive extensive CIA support, and

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which have also helped to man our roadwatch operations along the Ho Chi Minh trail. These guerrillas operate in Pathet Lao areas, and in some places have actually succeeded in winning and holding territory for the RLG.

On the other hand, the Communists have -- within the strategic balance pictured above -- regularly nibbled at RLG areas of control outside the Mekong plain. First, they took the Plain of Jars. In 1967-68 they took the Nam Bac Valley in Luang Prabang province and wiped out guerrilla bases in most of Houa Phan (Sam Neua) province in the Northeast. These gains have been achieved in dry-season skirmishes rather than a sustained campaign.

The Fall of Na Khang in the Strategic Perspective: This incident is not vital to either level of conflict, but it may relate to both.

It certainly relates to the intra-Laotian struggle. The fall of the base and airstrip effectively seals off Sam Neua province (the Laotian "bulge" into North Vietnam) from all government operations. The commander of the guerrilla forces in the area, Vang Pao, is probably the ablest Laotian general. His Meo tribal forces have done more than their part in preventing the Communists from consolidating control of this hill area, but they have suffered severe manpower attrition. The Government is talking of removing their dependents to the plains, which would remove the last incentive for them to fight in the hills. Vang Pao himself has had to recognize that he does not have the power to do more than harass the enemy and perhaps to hold off further offensives until the wet season stops the Communists.

A threat may now be more easily posed to the major "Neutralist" (friendly) base of Moung Soui. These forces are not distinguished fighters; and if they are dispersed, the Government's position will become shakier.

The RLG has suffered a psychological setback of serious proportions. The Pathet Lao hand will be strengthened if the Communists should elect to call for negotiations to reconstitute the

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three-way coalition envisaged by the Geneva Accords of 1962 -- a decision which would be a tactic to weaken and eventually destroy Souvanna rather than to help him.

The situation has become serious enough for Souvanna Phouma to have asked our Embassy that it extend our bombing to the Plain of Jars, and then to include the Communist administrative centers, a change of the ground rules which could lead to retaliation against Vientiane or other Communist responses. Our Embassy has complied, and a series of air strikes entitled "Operation Rain Dance" is being carried out to slow the enemy's momentum until the rainy season.

The incident could relate to the larger picture, and be part of the threat to Souvanna that he will lose more territory if he does not accede to pressures to call a halt to the American bombing.

Laos in the Paris Negotiations: The two levels of action point to the two principal problems which Laos will pose for us in the Paris negotiations. First will be the provision of adequate guarantees that lines of communication not be left open through Laos for the North Vietnamese to support continuing insurrection in the South, and for the Chinese and North Vietnamese to support the Communists in Thailand. Second, and related to this, will be the problem of arriving at some new balance in Laos itself which will protect Laos from being very quickly overrun by the North Vietnamese Communists with a facade of Pathet Lao participation. This will require international inspection and control of much greater weight and strength than the International Control Commission as structured in the 1962 Accords. Or it will require external forces to beef up the Laotians, or some threat of retaliation against stepped-up Vietnamese pressures sufficiently credible to persuade Hanoi to desist. None of these deterrents would be easily created.

Attachment

Secretariat (2)
HAK Chron (1)
Presidential Chron (1)
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